

Wilkes-Barre council asks apportionment panel to redraw districts

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An apportionment commission tasked with reshaping Wilkes-Barre's political future in 2002 has been asked by city council to reconvene in order to possibly amend or create new boundaries.

The commission's chairman, Attorney John P. Moses, plans to contact the other five members to determine whether to honor council's request or stand by a political subdivision approved in 2002. Marge Davison-Matisko, Paul DeFabo, Richard Gazenski, Paul Maher and Luzerne County Clerk of Courts Bob Reilly make up the rest of the commission.

In a July 1 letter to Assistant Wilkes-Barre Solicitor William Vinsko, Moses says, "... I will be consulting with my board in order to determine if I will be able to reconvene the committee or to submit a new letter."

Luzerne County Commissioner Todd Vonderheid read

excerpts of Moses' letter Thursday at a county Board of Elections meeting. Moses was responding to a June 15 letter from Vinsko.

QUICKINFO

A referendum approved in 2001 ended at-large voting for Wilkes-Barre council members and required establishment of voting districts.

In addition, city voters approved reducing the number of council members from seven to five.

this matter merely by holding a meeting of the current commission and allow the public input on the plans, possible discussion of re-evaluating the districts or taking whatever road you deem appropriate," Vinsko wrote.

One commission member,

In his letter, Vinsko cites allegations made about a commission meeting violating the state Sunshine Act, as well as the districts' configuration, as reasons to reconvene.

"It is my belief that we can resolve

Charles Flannery, has since died. One of three alternates, Christine Katsock, Todd Kline or Harold Phoenix, would take Flannery's spot.

Council never changed the city's charter to reflect the commission's 2002 political subdivision.

The scenario divides parts of the city's 12 neighborhoods into five linear districts. It was supposed to be the format for a referendum approved by city voters in 2001 that eliminated two council seats and implemented district-based elections for the remaining five seats. Prior to the referendum, council members had been elected at-large.

The commission's argument was linear districts made council members accountable to a large section of the city, not just two or three neighborhoods. Members of the public, including former Mayor Tom McGroarty, disagreed, arguing districts should keep the neighborhoods intact.

Moses could not be reached

for comment Thursday.

Whether the commission decides to stand behind its 2002 scenario or reconvene, Vinsko insisted the approved referendum would be recognized in the 2007 election when five, not seven, council members will be elected. A lawsuit challenging the referendum stopped its 2003 implementation.

"The districting commission was formed to do a job," Vinsko said Thursday night. "I'm not trying to tell them how to do their job. I have complete faith in each of the members and their decision, my recommendation to council will be based on what I receive or what happens next."

City council has come under fire from the board of elections and members of the Green and Republican political parties for failing to adopt the commission's plan in time for the 2003 election.

Luzerne County Commissioner Stephen Urban even suggested holding a special

election in 2005 to implement changes.

City council has amended the city's charter to reduce the number of council seats from seven to five, said Councilwoman Kathy Kane. It will not adopt districts until the commission responds to its request.

"There's been some controversy not only on our part but by Carl Romanelli and the Green Party," Kane said.

In April, the Green Party filed a petition with council to revise the districts claiming the commission offered a flawed, tainted recommendation. The party also implied districts were drawn to strengthen current council members' chances in elections.

"If they reconvene, we hope they would be more respectful to listen to the residents' concerns," said Romanelli, co-chair of the county Green Party.

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